III

Faint light—not luminous enough to steer
a single eye, but still sufficient to
direct the feet of one whose vision is
attuned to darkness—guided Crankstool's flight
as he retraced the path he'd taken from
the Smith's log cabin to his rendezvous
with Seinvalore and Satan, who had found
the Lesser Temptor trying to escape
the council unobserved and collared him,
then commandeered his service with a charge
to roust the Smith boy and deliver him
back to the clearing. Crankstool reached the house
while Lucy's boys were yet abed, and he
began a search for decoys that might draw
the youth outside the safety of his home,
that institutional extension of
the heavens into which no devil may
advance without an invitation. Soon,
he heard a bovine answer to his quest
reverberating from the barn. It was
still very early in the morning, but
with cows to milk and other pre-dawn chores
to tend to, Crankstool knew the Smiths would not
be long in stirring.

Sure enough, the door
swung open minutes later, and the three
oldest boys—Alvin, Hyrum, Joseph—all
emerged, half stumbling, half asleep, into

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the April air. Behind a smoky bank
of clouds the newly waning gibbous moon
still shone with unremitting radiance,
but not a trace of that reflected star
light pierced the misty darkness that obscured
the Smiths' abode; the trio made its way
toward the cowshed led by nothing but
the quaking glow and fragrant odor of
a single spermaceti candle. Once
inside, the younger two, astride their stools,
began to tug at turgid udders while
their elder brother mucked each stall and forked
fresh hay atop an empty manger. For
a time the only human sound to mar
the early morning stillness was the hack
of phlegm relocating from throat to floor,
but this somatic cleansing seemed to rouse
the boys, at last, from slumber. Joseph spoke
and told his brothers of the night's events—
how he had gone for water; how the gun's
first sharp report awakened him to all
the perils of his present state; and how
kind providence had caused him to retreat
scant seconds prior to the second ball's
coming.

With grateful voice grave Hyrum gave
a prayer of thanks, but Alvin laughed and said,
"Next time you think a murderer's outside
the house, you're carrying the light." And then,
more somberly, he warned, "I'm guessing that
the gunman's up and gone since no one shot
us as we crossed the yard, but we'd be fools
to cross again without confirming that
he's left." They peered with caution at a world
all bathed in gray, as dawn began to stalk
the day, and minutes later Hyrum found
the bed of smothered grass whence Howard had
decamped the night before. They squatted there,
and squandered breath in speculation while
the demon labored to convince a squirrel

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that acorns lay concealed beneath a stack
of kindling. When its scrabbling claws dislodged
a stick, the Smith boys startled at the sound,
imagining their would-be killer had
returned for blood; seeing the squirrel, they laughed
at their collective folly—the idea
of fearing such a creature! Alvin joked
that even if the pint-sized rodent had
a hatchet or some other weapon, just
their toes would be in danger—jesting words,
but they reminded Joseph of his own
tool, rusting in the cedar stump. He told
both brothers of his fault and reassured
them that he would be cautious as he fetched
the hatchet; then, without responding to
their protests, he arose and jogged off at
the rising of the sun to meet the Prince
of Darkness and to ask the question whose
reply has since been heard around the world.

Wrenching his hatchet from the bark where it
was buried, Joseph lost his footing on
the forest's slimy sub-floor of decayed
organics, tumbling backwards. As he sat,
he noticed that the normal sylvan sounds
seemed to have disappeared; remembering
his futile quest for peace and quiet just
the night before, the boy decided to
renew that first attempt at prayer and knelt
beside the stump.

"O God in heaven—" he
began, but gagged, his tongue engorged and dry,
as darkness deep enough to drown in draped
his body like a second skin and filled
his mouth with ash. His constitution strained
against an unseen adversary's choke-
hold—nostrils wide, snorting for air, more horse
or hog than human; muscles firing blanks
at spectral shadows; ears unable to
ignore or process all the tortured screams
and other aural horrors fighting for

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a corner of his consciousness. Oppressed
by foreign powers, Joseph struggled to
establish his autonomy and with
some effort managed to stop rolling on
the forest floor as though he were a sea-
sick barrel crossing the Atlantic in
a schooner's hold, determined not to let
external stimuli deprive him of
his agency.

For his part, Satan took
the boy's abrupt quiescence as a sign
of his surrender and began to gloat
over the prostrate aspect of his prey.
A moment later, though, when Joseph raised
his head up off the ground, contempt gave way
to shock, and that surprise caused Satan to
release his stranglehold just long enough
for Joseph to regain his feet. Their war
resumed at once, and Joseph stepped toward
the stump to brace himself against the weight
of Satan's brutal onslaught. His left leg
buckled first. Crawling on his knees, he went
a little further, falling on his face.
Despair sank in, and Joseph stretched his hands
as though in supplication for the end;
his fingers found a root, then—

Light, more felt
than seen, descended from the heavens and
delivered him immediately from
the enemy that held him bound. He rolled
over and saw the treetops bathed in flames
far brighter than the noonday sun, white tongues
of fire illuminating every bush
and branch without consuming even their
most tender, curling leaves. This radiant blaze
above drew gradually nearer till
it rested on the boy. Enveloped by
that brilliant sphere of flame, his mind was caught
away from contemplation of the sights
and sounds surrounding, and he found himself

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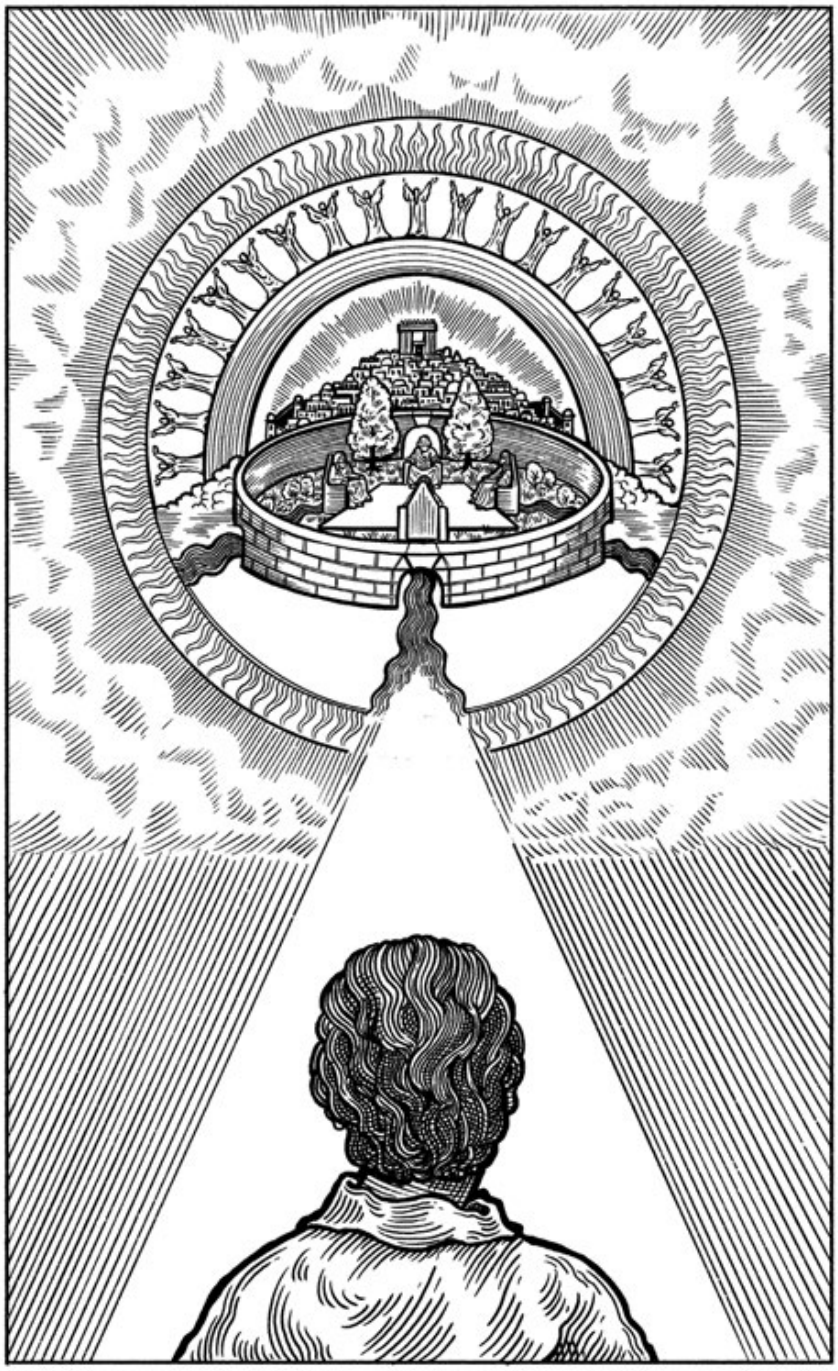

FIGURE 5. "The Opening of Joseph's Vision." Godwin.

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wrapped up in visions of the heavenly
Jerusalem, whose jasper walls were thronged
with an innumerable company
of angels singing praises to the Lamb.
Concentric circles of the faithful danced
with upraised arms around the ramparts, and
their fingers twirled together through the air,
revolving like the tasseled hem of some
divinely skirted whirling dervish or
the spray of water droplets sluicing off
a miller's wheel. Four rivers streamed like spokes
from under a quartet of thrones arranged
at cardinal points around a central square,
and Joseph watched with wonder as a pair
of personages left their garden thrones
together and descended slowly to
him. Clothed in searing light that seemed to bake
a filmy membrane off his corneas,
both luminescent bodies braked above
him in the air, afloat, and Joseph saw
with some surprise that these two Beings shared
a single face, physique, and wardrobe—that
the two were one. They stood there silent and
unmoving save the whisper of their robes,
which billowed gently in the breeze as though
they had been cut from clouds, expectantly.

After a brief delay, remembering
his purpose, and pastoral battles for
the Bible's apostolic sanction, and
the lack of Christian union, Joseph screwed
his courage up and blurted out, "Which church
is right? In which should I enlist?"

The Man
whose face seemed slightly more supernal, like
it formed a mold from which the second had
been cast—his pupils sparkled, and he spoke,
with bared arm pointing to the figure at
his right before declaring: "Joseph, this
is my Beloved Son, in whom I am
well pleased: Hear him."

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The other personage
stepped forward, gliding softly down to earth,
and stood before the boy with open palms.
In his divinely reconstructed hands—
hands that had labored, built, and healed without
expecting compensation—Joseph saw
the nail prints left by Judas' lynch mob, and
his own hands suddenly felt slippery
with blood. Tears sprang unbidden to his eyes
as he reflected on errata, sins,
and follies wrung out drop by bloody drop,
from every pore, on his account. With fear
and trembling Joseph struggled to his knees
and bent to kiss the broken feet. He wept
with wracking sobs of painful joy and bathed
each scar in guilt and gratitude and love.
The knees above him flexed, and Joseph felt
a gentle touch which quelled his crying and
invited him to lift his gaze.

Two ears,
two eyes, a nose, two lips: he had a face
like every man but one in which no trace
of pride or jealousy or fear appeared,
a canvas where opposing virtues met
their mates. Compassion; judgment; wisdom; zeal;
humility; and strength: his countenance
expressed them all, and Joseph stared in awed,
mute adoration upwards, grasping his
forgiving palms as though to reassure
himself that flesh and bone had just revealed
the truth that Jesus was and is the Christ,
Son of the Living God.

A man, more sure
of his own place in the eternal plan,
would have been patient; Joseph, being but
a boy, was not. Now that he knew God's love,
he knew that God would keep his promises,
and so he asked again, expecting to
be given: "Which of all the sects is right?
the Methodists?"

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Unbending at the knees,
the Lamb rose up a Shepherd and began
the work of gathering his wayward sheep:
"Joseph, my son, rejoice; in me your sins
have been forgiven. For behold, I am
the Lord of Glory, Jesus Christ: He who
was crucified for all mankind, that none
need suffer if they will repent. But all
those who will not repent must suffer just
as I, with pains that caused me, greatest of
God's sons, to tremble, bleed from every pore,
and plead that this, last, bitterest of cups
might be forgone. Nevertheless, I drained
the chalice of affliction so that all
those who believe in me and hearken to
my words may have eternal life.

"And now,
behold, the whole world lies in sin, and I
have looked upon its churches with contempt,
speaking of sects and creeds collectively,
not individuals. Do not attach
yourself to them, for they have turned aside
their hearts from following the precepts of
my gospel. Some seek earnestly for truth
but know not where to find it, led astray
by others, who draw near me with their lips
yet scorn me in their hearts. All these corrupt
professors teach for doctrine the ideas
of men, to gratify their pride. They have
impoverished the faith of millions, and
mine furor has been kindled over the
inhabitants of Earth. According to
the wickedness of their endeavors I
will visit them in judgment and will bring
to pass the sifting spoken of by all
my prophets and apostles.

"Nation shall
contend with nation, and there shall be wars
and rumors of wars; great pollutions shall
envelop Earth, and murders, whoredoms, and

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deceivings shall prevail. There shall be heard
reports of earthquakes, tempests, fires, and clouds
of smoke in foreign lands. Men's hearts shall fail
them, and the love of many shall wax cold
because iniquity abounds. And in
that day the people shall be lifted up
in pride because of their great riches. For
there shall be many merchants, lawyers, and
officials, all distinguished into ranks
according to their wealth and chances to
obtain an education. And for this
inequity they shall be broken up
by jarrings, strifes, contentions—covetous
and lustful cravings. Brothers shall attack
their brethren; blood shall cover up the moon;
and then shall I come quickly to dispense
with egoism—clothed in judgment and
destruction.

"But before that day my strange
love shall work upon the hearts of many,
and I will pour my Spirit out upon
all flesh. Young women shall dream dreams; young men
shall hear my voice in prayer; and I will show
unto the world that I change not. I am
today the same as yesterday—the same
forever. Therefore, I will now proceed
to show a great and marvelous delight
among this people, either to convince
them of my gospel unto peace and life
eternal or convict the hardness of
their hearts and blindness of their minds until
they have been brought into captivity
by him who was and is the father of
all lies. My truth shall break across the earth
like roaring waves upon the shore, and you,
my servant Joseph, shall interpret for
this generation. Ere I formed you in
the womb, I knew you, and before you left
the belly I ordained and sanctified
you as a prophet to the nations.

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"You
shall be my voice of warning to the world
and cry repentance unto presidents
and rulers, rich and learned, for they have strayed
from all my ordinances and believe
in incorrect doctrines, persuaded by
the Evil One to walk in their own ways
and after idols of their own conceit,
from dimness into darkness. Wherefore, I,
the Lord, have called you, Joseph, to proclaim
these things, that faith might be increased upon
the earth; that every man might speak in my
name; that my everlasting covenant
might be established; that my only true
and living church might be erected on
a sure foundation. For when Satan shall
send forth his mighty winds and iron shafts
of war, my saints must see the storm's approach
from watchtowers and gather to a place
of refuge which shall never fall. The hearts
of fathers and the hearts of children shall
be turned to one another, and my house
shall once again be reared, that all my saints
might come into my presence to receive
my holy oracles and be endowed
with power from on high. Nevertheless,
the time is not yet come—the time when you
shall build my house. You cannot comprehend
the nature of that work which you will do
on my behalf in future days, but as
your understanding of my gospel grows,
and as you implement its principles
into your life, your power to discern
and to perform my will shall be increased.

"Go forth, and hearken to my counsel. We
shall visit you again, in days to come,
and give you new instructions."

Joseph woke,
uncertain how much time had passed since he
left home, uncertain where his hatchet lay,

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uncertain how and when his life would change.
But one thing he was certain of: God loved
him. Jesus had forgiven him—no, He
had given for him all that was required
and had commanded him to qualify
for his commission, in the future, as
an under-shepherd. Joseph lay there, spent,
content to stare as spring unwound before
his eyes, indefinitely, only roused
by Alvin's voice. Prolonged exposure to
the light of Christ had given him a case
of bosom burn; heart palpitations and
core temperatures well north of normal left
him weak, and conscious of his weakness, he
let Alvin haul him to his feet.

On their
return trip Joseph told his brother how
he'd prayed; of wrestling with an angel; and
of meeting Jesus again, for the first
time, face-to-face. If Alvin was surprised
by Joseph's story, no stray word betrayed
him. Truth be told, his brother seemed to be
anticipating each successive plot
point, as though Joseph's basic narrative—
boy prays to God; devil deters boy; boy
persists; devil departs; and God names boy
a prophet—had been lifted from a best-
seller whose Everyman protagonist
would denouement in glory. (Novelty
was never an accomplishment or sign
of heavenly approval; Alvin knew
Ecclesiastes well enough for that.)
His probing questions and approving grunts
or nods seemed almost catechetical,
and this first, sympathetic audience
braced Joseph for the cynicism and
the scorn to come.

Arriving at their home
as Joseph brought his narrative to its
conclusion, Alvin told the prophet, "I

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believe you, brother. And I thank you for
your confidence. However, I suspect
in coming days your witness will be met
with skeptic mockery. So cleave to your
convictions, and await the further light
and knowledge that was promised to you by
the Savior.

"In the meantime, don't cast pearls
before the swine; recall that Samuel
was loathe to tingle Eli's ears with news
that God had picked another prophet, and
he certainly did *not* invite King Saul
to Jesse's house for the anointing of
his eighth son. Reverend Beeston and the rest
probably won't embrace a vision that
denounces them as well-intentioned but
misguided frauds, especially if you—
a boy, unbaptized, with no better than
an elementary education—are
the visionary. I believe you, Joe,
but I'm your older brother; I'm supposed
to. Didn't Aaron follow Moses when
Jehovah called him from the burning bush
to challenge Pharaoh? All I'm saying is
that you don't have a rod, and Heaven seems
to think you need more seasoning before
we take on Egypt. So be careful who
you tell about this. Mother? Father? Fine—
but no one else, unless you're sure that God
would have you speak."

These providential words
of counsel were accepted with a nod
and grateful grin. But Joseph quickly learned
that keeping all these things locked in his heart
for pondering was far more difficult
than Mary made it seem. When Samuel
heard Joseph ask their parents for a word
in private, he decided that he *had*
to know his brother's secret and became
importunate, cajoling Joe with oaths

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and promises of confidence. He prayed,
as Alvin had suggested, and was told
in no uncertain terms that Samuel
could not, as yet, be trusted to respect
the sanctity of revelation; truth
must dazzle gradually or every man
go blind, and patience is the better part
of prophecy more oft than not. And yet,
not yet implies a future change of heart,
so Samuel persisted. Joseph asked
a second time and got the same reply.
The third time, though—perhaps like Luke's unjust
judge, God had tired of Joseph's pleading; or,
perhaps he had, like heart-sick parents of
that prodigal, acceded to unwise
demands, instead of waiting till the youth
no longer valued his permission or
advice—the third time Father granted his
request: Sam *could* be told, provided he
agreed to hold this knowledge sacred and
never reveal (except directed by
his brother) this first sign and token of
God's full and final dispensation to
the human family.

He *meant* well. And,
he held his tongue for longer than you might
expect. But Samuel was just a boy
and, foreordained to labor as the first
of all the missionaries who would bear
his Brother's message, couldn't keep the good
news to himself indefinitely.

By
November, Joseph's bag was catless, and
the news reached Reverend Beeston just as he
had settled by the fireside for a dose
of Epiphanius before he put
the Sabbath Day to rest. The Widow Byrd,
that pious gossip, bustled in to share
The Revelation of Joe Smith, and he
received her message with the same keen thrill

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that stirred the hearts of sailors on the whale-
ship *Essex*—in that very moment, on
the other side of this revolving globe,
astride the pulsing South Pacific—at
the cry of "There she blows!"

Old heresies
revived by an American farmer:
Who would have thought that Joseph Smith, because
he found our synod inhospitable,
should then imagine he was capable
of forming a proprietary church
and system of theology? Of course
there is no question of succeeding; Smith's
zeal will evaporate before it's crossed
the little walls of stone that walk the line
between his own fields and his neighbor's. How
does he expect to gather followers?
The man can hardly speak, and publishing
the terms of his perverted testament
will take a better grasp of grammar than
an unlearned farmer's conversation can
sustain in black and white. And how will—

But
the Reverend's reverie was broken up
by his renewed awareness of the Byrd's
chirping: ". . . so I told Phlyaros I thought
a boy his age might have a little—"

"Boy?
But I had thought—which is to say . . . the son?"
That he, a minor, should presume to know
God's will and arrogate authority
belonging to his betters so enraged
old Beeston that he preached on nothing but
submission to your elders for a year.
He proved that children are natural slaves,
unfit to rule themselves or others, in
a hundred ways: with sermons on the Fifth
Commandment and the proper worship of
Jehovah; on the load of Isaac and

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his binding; on the Savior's thirty-year
apprenticeship to Joseph; and on Paul's
confession that, as Saul, he thought and spoke
as children do—until a call to the
Apostleship forced him to put aside
his puerile ways.

Lectured and taunted by
the people of Palmyra, Joseph turned
again to God in prayer—but nothing came.
No unexpected flash of insight with
the Spirit's sweet confirming peace; no still
small voice to whisper words of counsel and
command; no smoking lamp or dewy fleece
to signify the will of Father and
his Firstborn. Whether swayed by Beeston's proofs
against the leadership of anyone
still shy of his majority; or slow
to answer after prior messages
were lightly treated; or reluctant to
condemn the boy with dictates he could not
be counted on to keep—whatever his
pure purpose, God was silent.

Joseph, to
be fair, was hardly knocking at the door
of heaven urgently enough to rouse
its porter. Like a pilgrim in pursuit
of fields more free and fertile, who arrives,
surprised, beside an unknown sea between
himself and his next waypoint, then forgets
his journey while enjoying all that beach
living can offer, Joseph wallowed. He
indulged in angst and thoughts of martyrdom.
He hunted treasure with his father, and
he dreamed of kissing Leah Sullivan.
He was a teenage boy who loved a joke
and farted more than his fair share. So too,
in truth, did Zechariah: prophets share
the weaknesses of human nature and
endure an adolescence also.

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On
September twenty-first, three years now past
since he saw God's wet footprint in the sand,
headed for water, Joseph was impressed
into the service of his King. That night,
as Joseph tossed and turned in search of sleep,
he felt the stirrings of a dream that had,
in evenings past, disturbed his peace. He roused
himself to kneel beside the bed and prayed
for unadulterated rest, but light—
at first a solitary pinprick, like
a firefly come auditioning for work
as Joseph's personal pole star; and then,
the prick expanded, took on human shape
and came like lightning to his bedside, with
a searing brilliance which forbade the dark—
light banished thoughts of sleep from Joseph's brain.
This personage of midnight sun, whose light
had failed (the greatest miracle of all,
as Joseph joked in later days) to wake
his siblings, stood three inches off the ground
with nothing but a loose white robe between
his nakedness and chill autumnal air.

Without regard for placing words aright,
the angel shared his errand: "Joseph, my
name is Moroni. God has work for you
to do, and he has sent me here to give
you revelations and commandments not
a few. Close by, deposited within
an earthen bank, are plates of gold on which
a partial history is written of
this continent's first peoples and their deeds
and origins, including a report
of Jesus Christ: his ministry beyond
the grave to these, the other sheep he spoke
of, and the fullness of his gospel. With
the book are two interpreters—stones set
in silver bows athwart a breastplate—called
Urim and Thummim. You must use the stones
to translate this account and to invest
its ancient principles with currency,

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sent forth to all the world in paper. As
it circulates throughout the earth, your name
shall be pronounced in every language; blessed
and cursed by every nation; spoken by
all peoples.

"Behold, I the Lord will send
my messenger, and he prepares the way
before me, and the Lord you seek shall come
suddenly, to a temple you shall build,
in swift fulfillment of my covenant.
Today this scripture is accomplished in
your sight." Moroni's message, after that, came through
in fits and snatches: "*. . . leave them neither root*
nor branch . . . and turn the hearts of children to
their father . . . Jesse, and a Branch shall grow
from out his roots; and . . ." Like an analog
radio signal interrupted by
the canyonlands that human trains of thought
traverse, all serpentine, the angel's words
negotiated the topography
of Joseph's brain and found an audience
with only intermittent clarity.

And then, before he'd even understood
the interview was over, Joseph saw
a conduit to heaven open, and
Moroni disappeared, relinquishing
the room again to tarry blackness. Yet
the subtleties of night-sight he'd accrued
before the angel's visit still remained.
No dilatory reacquaintance with
the dark; his vision seemed to comprehend
a broader portion of the spectrum now,
as though the primary effect of this
encounter was to render him a prism—
refracting the invisible but all-
pervading covenantal light of Christ
into observable new frequencies.

In bed, as he was lying, musing on
the singularity of fortune and
the golden book that would, apparently,

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make his, another point of light, in size
and contour like a needle's eye, caught his,
and then that body full of glory stood
again beside him. Other angels might
have gone off book and bollocksed up the whole
production, as when Milton's Raphael
suborned the garden, but Moroni spoke
his lines verbatim, giving word-for-word
the same exact performance: "Joseph, I,
Moroni, have been sent by God to teach
you of the work he has prepared for you . . ."

This time, familiar with the substance of
his visitor's instructions, Joseph turned
aside his thoughts of gold just long enough
to hear the prophecies that had escaped
him earlier. And new ones too: the youth's
attention authorized the angel to
provide additional perspective on
the coming judgments—famine, pestilence,
and sword—that would afflict the wicked of
this generation. Overwhelmed by thoughts
of the apocalypse, he almost missed
the end of revelation, as the Bright
and Morning Star received Moroni to
himself, and Joseph was returned to night.

But only for the space of half an hour,
and then the veil of heaven was drawn back
a third time, so Moroni could repeat
his message yet again and add a word
of caution: "Satan will attempt your heart
and introduce your indigence as an
inducement to regard the golden plates
more for their monetary value than
their everlasting purpose in God's plan
for the salvation of his family.
This you must never do. The Lord will not
permit you to retrieve the record if
you go with any other motive than
the building of his kingdom."

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Joseph, who
had been a mute throughout the night now found
his voice: "To sell the plates for money would
deny the very means by which I came
to know of their existence and secured
them for myself—for God, I mean, of course."
But since the angel had departed as
he spoke, these final words of protest found
no audience. Or so the youth assumed
until the crowing cock reminded him
of God's omniscience, omnipresence, and
forgiveness. And, his morning chores.

Worn out
and weary from the night's unrest—or lost
in mazy contemplation of his new
responsibilities—he stumbled through
the rituals of daybreak wrapt in fogs
figurative and gaseous, sweating at
the apron-edge of harmony. Aware
that Joseph wasn't working with the same
enthusiasm he habitually
exuded, Alvin urged his brother to
extend his sickle with some might, and reap,
before the sun could bleach
their grain from golden green to bone and cause
it, overripe, to drop. But Senior saw
his namesake stagger with the blade and sent
him home for Mother's doctoring. En route,
he stopped to pluck an apple, sat to eat,
and woke to find Moroni there before
him, standing in the air.

"Again?" he asked.
The angel gave his message for a fourth
time, nothing varying, until he'd run
iteratively through the whole, and then:
a new commandment.

"Joseph, go and tell
your father all that you have heard and seen."
With holy purpose and the energy

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it gave him, Joseph searched out Alvin and
his father in the field, where he rehearsed
for them his new commission to retrieve
the book and publish its invaluable
account of Indian religion. They
accepted, without question, his report
of heaven's distillations, dewy-eyed
and joyful.

Each embraced the others, and
then Alvin, smiling, asked: "Well, brother, what
are you delaying for? Go get that book
and read whatever's written in it—I
expect that we can deal with this gold here
while you unearth a finer mill. Be quick
and run, before the angel figures out
he's picked a slow apprentice and revokes
your covenants!"

He raced off to obtain
the plates, first jogging home to fetch a sack
and tools, then heading for a local hill
Moroni called Cumorah. When he reached
the place appointed, Joseph levered up
a stone from off the sepulcher wherein
the word lay buried—like a golden seed
whose ancient roots had tapped the lifeblood of
a hemisphere, now poised to stem and branch
and blossom in the bistre, cream, and red
of Aaron's almond rod. But awe is not
sustainable in breathing beings; grown
familiar with the cache's contents, he
bent over, hoisted up the plates and the
interpreters, and gently placed them in
his burlap bag.

Then Joseph turned to go,
but looking back saw treasures with a past
and sacred purpose he could not begin
to guess—Mahonri's stony suns, the sword
of Laban, Zeezrom's onties—and had thoughts
of home and parents destitute despite

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FIGURE 6. "A Boy Yet Unworthy." Godwin.

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unceasing toil. *Moroni never spoke*
of other riches, Joseph mused, and loosed
his grip upon the sack to stretch again
into the silent tomb. *Perhaps I can—*

He couldn't. When he woke, his molars ached,
and though he longed to bend his knees and flex
his throbbing fingers, he seemed paralyzed,
unable to direct his body—saw
the sack was empty; saw the stone lid back
atop its cairn; and realized he had lost
the plates.

Despair descended like a shroud,
engulfing him in shame, and Joseph longed
for death. What followed, though, caused him to ask
if he might be a corpse already, damned
to a Promethean eternity.
The forest's undertakers bubbled up
beneath him in a frenzy, like some dark
libation spued back up by earthy gods:
centipedes, spiders, earwigs, earthworms, ants,
and salamanders. As they swarmed around
and over him, the bite of mandibles
and pincers in increasingly discreet
and tender places drove him nearly to
distraction, and he saw—or thought he saw—
demonic faces flickering across
insectoid features, metamorphoses
too rapid and inconstant to discern
with confidence.

Just as an earwig reached
his nostrils, the assault was stopped: from no
place blessed reprieve came with Moroni's fifth
appearance. He commanded, "In the name
of Jesus Christ, depart." They left, and so
did his paralysis, but any joy
at this relief was dissipated by
the angel's stern demeanor. "You have sinned
and, for a moment, felt the buffetings
of Satan in the flesh, to teach you not

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to trifle with the taint of darkness. Go,
and sin no more. The book is lost to you,
but you may yet repent and qualify
for service in the vineyard."

"Never? Am
I never to receive the plates? No terms
by which I might reclaim my privilege?"

"Come
again a year from now, with purer heart
and with the right companion. You shall be
instructed further and you may, if you
continue faithful, have the record four
years hence."

"But who should I bring with me? Who
is right before the Lord?"

"Bring Alvin." This
apparently concluded the exchange,
and Joseph made his way back home. Though he
was disappointed Joseph had returned
home empty-handed, Alvin felt a surge
of pride to know that God had chosen him
to play a part in bringing forth his word.
The brothers spoke of little else and soon
became inseparable, co-opting meals
and family devotionals with talk
of what Moroni had taught Joseph.

Too
abruptly, conversation ceased. Gall
of bitterness! The colic, calomel,
and then a coffin: Alvin's death came like
a thief at night, too sudden—terrible—
surprising—to resist or comprehend.
Malpractice, all agreed, but blaming the
physician was a barren comfort; hate
has yet to offer beauty for ashes.

The Reverend preached, in charity, from John,
"*I am the Resurrection and the Life*,"

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but Joseph was not comforted and stayed
behind to share his doubts with Alvin: "How
could he have let you die? It isn't fair.
You said you'd come with me September, and
Moroni said I *have* to bring you with
me; what am I supposed to do, dig up
your bones and haul them to Cumorah?"

Here
he paused, expectantly, as though the witch
of Endor might, at any moment, raise
his brother from the turf to answer these
complaints. Of course, she didn't. Peace of mind,
like any other peace, is always free
but seldom cheap. So Joseph struggled on:
"Did I mishear? No. When he spoke, he spoke
in English, and his terms for taking up
the plates were unambiguous.

"Could he
have been mistaken? Angels are just men
made perfect; maybe his infallibility
is pending, still in progress. If
Moroni can't be trusted, though, what grounds
have I for seeking to retrieve the plates?
That way lies madness. Every gift is good
which comes from God, in whom there is no slant
or swerving: surely, then, his messenger
must also be beyond reproach.

"What else?
Perhaps I've sinned, offended God, and he
revoked my high commission. Have my sins
made you expendable in some divine
arithmetic? Remaindered? While I yet
remain to languish here below? Such thoughts
are insupportable. Take pity on
me, Lord: deliver me from grief and doubt!"

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